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Viewing cable 09SANJOSE107, WHA/CEN DEPUTY DIRECTOR'S VISIT TO COST RICA:

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SANJOSE107	2009-02-21 00:27	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy San Jose

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-07/Investigacion/NotasDestacadas/Investigacion2704388.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-07/Investigacion/NotaPrincipal/Investigacion2704402.aspx>
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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 210027Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0508
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 4429
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RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 5028
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN JOSE 000107

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN, WHA/CCA, WHA/PPC, WHA/AND, WHA/EPSC, AND
INL/LP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2019
TAGS: [CS](#) [EFTA](#) [KSUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [SNAR](#)

SUBJECT: WHA/CEN DEPUTY DIRECTOR'S VISIT TO COST RICA:
REGIONAL ISSUES

REF: A. A) SAN JOSE 0018 AND PREVIOUS
B. B) SAN JOSE 0098

Classified By: Pol/Econ Counselor David E. Henifin per reason 1.4 (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: A senior MFA official candidly discussed a wide range of regional issues with WHA/CEN Deputy Director David Wolfe during the latter's February 9-11 visit to Costa Rica. Wolfe's interlocutor contrasted Costa Rica's frosty Nicaraguan relations with a warming trend with Panama, and signaled that Costa Rica did not want to be "the last country" in Central America to establish full relations with Cuba (under the assumption that El Salvador would do so quickly after an FMLN election victory next month). The MFA official also noted that the full regional summit and ministerial schedule in April (Pathways, SoA) and May (EU-Rio Group) complicated GOCR attendance plans. (The Casa Presidencial later announced that President Arias will attend the Summit of the Americas.) Overall, Wolfe heard the same concerns and arguments Post has heard in recent months, but direct and unfiltered. (Separately, FM Stagno echoed a number of these views in a meeting with the Ambassador and DCM on February 19.) Additional Merida and CAFTA-related issues are reported in Ref B. Wolfe did not clear this cable in advance. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (U) On February 11, Wolfe met with new Director of Foreign Policy (P-equivalent) Alejandro Solano, who was joined by Carlos Cordero, in charge of counternarcotics, counter-terrorism and Merida issues for the Ministry. Wolfe was accompanied by Pol/Econ Counselor and Poloff.

¶13. (SBU) MERIDA: The GOCR welcomed Merida assistance, Solano stressed, but believed that Central America was on the short end. Concentrating CN efforts on Mexico in the north and Colombia in the south would further "squeeze" drug traffickers into Costa Rica and its neighboring countries, concentrating the problem there. The "small" share of the Merida pie for Central America needed to be expanded, in the GOCR's view. Solano understood that Washington might be reviewing overall Merida funding levels now. If so, Central America (and Costa Rica) should receive a larger share. Stagno made the same argument to the Ambassador and DCM on February 19, and both suggested that a coordinated Central American regional for additional Merida funding might yield more success than ad hoc bilateral efforts.

¶14. (C) NICARAGUA AND PANAMA: Solano reviewed GOCR concerns about Nicaragua, especially as the global economic crisis deepened. The Costa Rican embassy and consulates issued over 300,000 visas in Nicaragua in 2008, in a good year. How much more immigration -- legal and illegal -- could Costa Rica expect to see in a bad year? Solano described Costa Rica as a "receptor" nation which did not want to close the door to immigrants on the one hand, but could not afford to be overwhelmed by a new flood from the north, on the other. Nicaragua should take "co-responsibility" for regulating migration to Costa Rica. In addition, as international assistance was suspended or dried up because of President Ortega's increasingly undemocratic behavior, Solano noted GOCR worries that Venezuelan assistance might take up more of the slack. He added that Costa Rican consuls had been "direct witnesses" to the election fraud and ensuing violence during the municipal elections.

¶15. (C) Mentioning the long-running Rio San Juan dispute (which is to be decided by the ICJ in March) and the nearly-dysfunctional Costa Rican-Nicaraguan bi-national commission (which is unlikely to meet again until 2010), Solano said that "99.9 percent" of his government's regional foreign policy problems were caused by Nicaragua. In contrast, he pointed to a distinct warming trend with Panama, a country and people with whom Costa Rica shared many "affinities." The border with Panama, although essentially open in many areas, was the "safest" of Costa Rica's national

boundaries, he maintained, featuring extensive cooperation on security and immigration issues.

¶16. (C) On a potentially related border issue, Stagno told the Ambassador and DCM that there had been eight fishing boat seizures by Nicaraguan authorities off Costa Rica's northern Pacific coast since November 2008; four of these in January alone. Although he acknowledged that Costa Rican fishermen may have drifted into Nicaraguan waters, Stagno speculated that the increase in seizures may be a move by the GON to

continue to stir up trouble along the border, in advance (and regardless) of the ICJ ruling.

¶17. (C) CUBA: The GOCR had seen little real change (and did not expect much) under Raul Castro, Solano explained, and expected Fidel's influence, and those of hard-liners such as FM Perez-Roque, to continue. He added that Costa Rica tried to work with Cuba on select issues in multilateral fora, including in the UN Human Rights Council, but this was often difficult. Solano said the GOCR "shared USG doubts" about the Council, but still hoped its operations could be improved. Hinting at a future change in policy (Ref A), he acknowledged that Costa Rica did not want to be "the last country" in Central America to establish full relations with Cuba. This is based on the MFA's judgment that if FMLN won the March-April elections in El Salvador, the GOES would and establish ties to Cuba shortly thereafter.

¶18. (C) Stagno also reprised this argument to the Ambassador and DCM on February 19, and questioned them intently for any authoritative indication of a change (i.e., a softening) of USG policy vis-a-vis Cuba. Stagno added that Cuba at least behaved predictably in multilateral fora, and sometimes more so than Costa Rica's Central American neighbors. Although skeptical of significant collaboration with Havana, Stagno explained that Costa Rica had worked with Cuba on select multilateral issues in the past, and hoped to continue to do so in the Rio Group. "Better to have Cuba in, than out," he stressed.

¶19. (C) VENEZUELA (PETROCARIBE): Solano confirmed that Costa Rica still intended to join Petrocaribe during the organization's next ministerial, although the urgency had diminished with the drop in oil prices. Given the cyclical nature of petroleum price fluctuations, however, it is better in the GOCR's view to lock in the low-interest Petrocaribe arrangement now, than to have to scramble for it later, according to Solano. (He and key legislators who also met with Wolfe confirmed that the National Assembly would have to approve the Petrocaribe deal. This could further slow accession.)

¶10. (SBU) SUMMITS AND MINISTERIALS: On Pathways, Costa Rica "shares the USG's vision" of "expanding the frontiers of trade," Solano told Wolfe. CAFTA is just one of the tools to do this. The Arias administration retained its deep interest in Asia-Pacific relations, he added, hoping to join APEC. The crowded international meeting calendar in April-May complicated GOCR attendance plans, but Solano said that Trade Minister Ruiz would likely attend the Pathways Ministerial; FM Stagno's plans had not been confirmed. Solano thought that President Arias probably would attend the Summit of the Americas (and this was confirmed by an official announcement on February 16).

¶11. (SBU) With the Ambassador and DCM on February 19, FM Stagno noted President Arias' planned attendance at the SoA, and wryly asked how the White House would handle "32 requests for bilaterals" with POTUS. Stagno also evinced surprise that the new US Administration was continuing the Pathways process. The Ambassador and DCM stressed the continued USG commitment to Pathways, and encouraged Stagno and Ruiz to attend.

¶12. (C) OTHER HEADLINES: Solano also made the following brief observations to Deputy Director Wolfe:

-- The UNSC: Important enough to Costa Rican foreign policy objectives, even beyond the Arias administration, that the GOCR was considering running again for a non-permanent seat in 2012;

-- Colombia: Costa Rica enjoyed outstanding relations with Colombia, but President Uribe would generate a serious "credibility" problem for his country if he pressed to remain in office another term. Latin America needed not only positive examples of democratic governance, but also of democratic transition;

-- El Salvador: The GOCR was less concerned about "centrist" FMLN presidential candidate Mauricio Funes than about his party, which might push him far to the left, once in office. This could upset the current political "equilibrium" in Central America;

-- Honduras: The Zelaya administration may have started off with the right intentions, but had now become unpredictable political "jello"; and

-- Central America Overall: The GOCR's main worries (in rank order) were thus Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala (because of the deteriorating security situation there). Panama, "a complete partner," remains the bright spot in the region, and Belize is Costa Rica's best ally in SICA.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Solano's tour d'horizon gave Wolfe an unvarnished review of some of the concerns and arguments we have heard in recent months. Solano was obviously reflecting his Minister's views, since Stagno covered so much of the same ground eight days later with the Ambassador. The "more Merida" refrain has been echoed consistently from President Arias on down; we continue to believe, however, that Costa Rica is in line to receive about as much assistance as it can absorb effectively. The continuing warming with Panama may provide additional opportunities for CN and other law enforcement-related cooperation. Neither Costa Ricans nor Panamanians consider themselves fully part of Central America, and that self-styled sense of "uniqueness" may actually draw the two countries closer together on some issues. For the record, however, we have to differ with Solano on border cooperation. The border with Panama may be friendlier, but the only "hard" border crossing in the region is at Penas Blancas, with Nicaragua, where law enforcement units cooperate fairly well together, even if the two governments do not.

CIANCHETTE